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SUBJECT: MEMORIES OF BUKOVICA WAR CRIMES STILL FRESH 15 YEARS LATER

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On July 23, the Ambassador traveled to Montenegro's remote Bukovica region to meet with Muslims who survived a campaign of ethnic cleansing in 1992 and 1993. Bukovica is one of five war crimes cases that occurred on Montenegrin territory or that involved Montenegrin citizens. Several told heart-wrenching stories of murders, abductions, homes burned, assaults on the young and elderly, and expulsions. An investigation into these crimes began only in 2007, with no indictments or other progress thus far. A week after the Ambassador's visit, the government announced a 4.5 million Euro development plan for Bukovica, but it seems unlikely that many of those who fled will return. END SUMMARY.

The Bukovica War Crimes Case

2. (U) Bukovica's 37 villages, surrounded on three sides by the Republika Srpska, formerly had 1,500 residents, of whom 65-70 percent were Bosniaks or Muslims. According to various sources, between 1992 and 1993, Yugoslav Army (VJ) reservists, backed by paramilitary troops and local Montenegrin police officers, expelled dozens of Muslim families (about 221 individuals in all) from the region's villages, forcing them to flee to Pljevlja, as well as to Sarajevo and Cajnice in Bosnia. According to press reports, eight civilians were murdered, eleven were abducted and remain unaccounted for, 70 were physically assaulted, and 40 were taken to prison camps. In addition, eight houses and two mosques were burned. Even after 15 years, their repatriation has been slow. Of 250 residents in Bukovica today, only about 45 are Muslims, and the region is now one of the least populated in Montenegro.

3. (U) Montenegrin authorities have done little thus far to bring the perpetrators of these crimes to justice. While one individual was convicted of a murder (not a war crime) in 1993, it was not until December 2007 that the Higher Court in Bijelo Polje formally initiated an investigation of the possible involvement of seven Pljevlja residents (two former policemen and five military reservists) in war crimes against a civilian population.

4. (SBU) When the Ambassador visited Bukovica on July 23, local

police initially recommended against the journey due to bad road conditions. (Note: The Ambassador has previously traveled to remote areas in Montenegro, even in winter, but has never received such a warning before). Before the Ambassador's car reached Bukovica, his local police escort pulled over, asserting that the road was "unsafe" to continue further. The police then insisted that the road be inspected before going any further in an apparent attempt to delay the visit. An Embassy driver eventually drove the road with the police escort and confirmed that it was quite passable, and the Ambassador pressed on.

"The Agony Began on May 4, 1992..."

¶5. (SBU) In Bukovica, the Ambassador spoke with 13 Muslim residents, many of whom had been expelled from their homes in 1992-93. Several told heart-wrenching stories of their experiences during this period. For example, one elderly man recounted numerous beatings at the hands of police. Haris Tahirbegovic, who was 17 at the time, recalled that his family's "agony began on May 4, 1992," when local police and Yugoslav reservists expelled his family from their home and stole his mother's gold jewelry while he and his brother were taken away in an army vehicle. Neighbors eventually freed them, but they lived "under constant threat" until July 18, 1992, when they were ordered to permanently leave, presumably by police.

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¶6. (SBU) Tahirbegovic said his family initially fled to Pljevlja. When they tried to return to Bukovica, local residents bombed their home. He eventually fled to Bosnia, where he stayed for ten years. According to Tahirbegovic, 90 percent of people expelled from Bukovica either live in Sarajevo or have since died. He added that, to add insult to injury, many of the local police officers who took part in the atrocities had since been promoted.

¶7. (SBU) Not all Bukovica's Muslims fled during the early 1990s. For example, Hasan Okica told the Ambassador that some Muslim families who enjoyed "good reputations" were allowed to stay. But even those who remained recalled a tense period. For example, Stovrag Ismet, who stayed in Bukovica, said that although he was never physically assaulted, his Serb neighbors cut the electricity to his home. He later sent his wife and daughter to Pljevlja out of fear for their safety. Salem Becic, an elderly man who also remained, said army reservists desecrated his mother's grave. He added that the few Muslims left in the village have been treated as "second-class citizens."

¶8. (SBU) Several participants expressed concern that the meeting might provoke the anger of the authorities and of their Serb neighbors. One Muslim asked the Ambassador to make it clear to Serb residents that the meeting was held at the Ambassador's initiative. In fact, several Serb residents later showed up at the meeting and asked to speak with the Ambassador. (See Para. Eleven.)

Focus On The Present

¶9. (SBU) A number of participants chose to shift the discussion to present-day difficulties of life in Bukovica - namely, the lack of jobs and economic opportunities, as well as the isolation, bad roads, and poor access to medical care during the winter months. All agreed that improving the roads to Bukovica was their top priority, but disagreed over exactly which road should be repaired. Some believe that the government is using their lack of unity to do nothing. Others asked that the GoM establish a purchasing center for locally-produced agricultural products.

A Plea For Help

¶10. (SBU) Participants implored the Ambassador to help them obtain compensation for their suffering and destruction of property, and to help improve living conditions in Bukovica. The Ambassador promised to raise both issues with the GoM; he also promised to find out more about a government initiative -- mentioned at an earlier meeting by the Deputy Mayor of Pljevlja -- that was supposed to provide assistance to Bukovica residents. The residents were unaware of it and highly skeptical. (Following his return, the Ambassador raised economic issues in Bukovica with the Deputy PM, the President's Office, and with two other Ministers.)

Meeting with Serbs

¶11. (SBU) During a spontaneous meeting with Serb residents, the Serbs said it was "time to forget the past" and move on. They too complained about living conditions and said bad roads hampered their ability to sell goods in Bosnia, formerly their main market. The Ambassador pointed out that Serbs and Muslims

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seemed to have similar concerns. The Ambassador then visited a church that Serb residents were constructing with volunteer labor and materials.

Unexpected Good News

¶12. (U) A week later, the GoM adopted a development plan for Bukovica, which will initially allocate 386,000 Euros to reconstruct a 16 kilometer stretch of road leading to Kovacevici village. Another ten kilometer portion, eventually connecting Montenegro to the Bosnian border, is in even worse condition and is the area where the worst cleansing occurred; however, the GoM has not agreed to allocate monies to repair this part of the road.

¶13. (U) Minister without Portfolio Suad Numanovic, the GoM's coordinator for the Bukovica development strategy, told the Ambassador on August 1 that up to 4.5 million Euros would be budgeted for Bukovica over the next two years. According to Numanovic, the plan was initiated by President Vujanovic to

encourage returns and stimulate the region's economy, to the benefit of both Muslims and Serbs. Numanovic played down the political significance of the initiative, saying that it was part of the GoM's overall strategy to promote economic growth in the north.

¶14. (U) Numanovic identified poor roads and lack of electricity as the main problems for residents of the area. He also presented the Ambassador with a list of 36 people who formally expressed interest in returning to Bukovica. He added that 110 homes (some inhabited and some abandoned) in the region need repair and said that the GoM would set aside up to 2.5 million of the total 4.5 million Euros for this purpose. Numanovic also said that the GoM would offer small business loans to residents and returnees.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) It is encouraging that the GoM is finally trying to improve economic conditions and encourage returnees. However, the dire economic conditions in Bukovica, its remote location, and the significant time lag since area residents fled make it unlikely that many will return. The GoM economic initiative is positive, but it does not erase the fact that fifteen years later, the perpetrators of Bukovica's "ethnic cleansing" have still not been brought to justice. The strange behavior of the police during the Ambassador's visit suggests that there is still a long way to go before interethnic relations in Bukovica are normalized.

MOORE